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International Fellow

Arab Spring Hurricane

by

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United States Army War College
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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

ARAB SPRING HURRICANE

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ABSTRACT

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The ideal of promoting democracy in the Arab region was for some time not immediately obvious, but the pressure of injustice and loss of hope motivated people to struggle for freedom. Implications for the armed forces, and the potential for using the armed forces against the people, differed from country to country depending on the political concepts in force and the ideology of the army itself. This paper will compare the reactions of the respective armies to political contestation in Egypt, Syria, and Libya. It will seek to demonstrate differing concepts about how an army should be used under such circumstances.

ARAB SPRING HURRICANE

The Arab spring came like a massive hurricane; no one expected it to happen. The dictators in our region were taking what they believed were the right steps to ensure their security. It was really just about gesturing with the hand one way or another to have something done. They built a castle to live in, and established special security forces to protect them and their families. Let me establish the back ground.

Democracy in Arab countries was for some time not well established. There was some possibility for people to protest in the streets, but this was usually only used in order to give the regimes an excuse to illustrate that democracy existed in their countries. The dictatorial regimes used all means to hammer the people. They established security by enforcing martial law when it was time to ensure their selfish goals, ignoring economic development, health care, education, and human rights. People had a desire to see different faces rule the country. In Egypt, Hosni Mubarak had been president for thirty years, meaning that generations of people had seen no one but him in charge. In our country the idea of handing over power from father to son was considered to be like the inheritance of property. The gap in wealth and life style between rich and poor people became incredibly wide. These were the realities of dictatorial rule, which allowed for sentiments to build up that would lead to an uprising of the people against their regimes in favor of democracy. Dictators were able to perpetuate themselves in the Middle East by taking advantage of the people exploiting the consequences of poverty and ignorance. Thinking about how the people might gather together and act in their best interests seemed like a dream, since there seemed

to be no hope to challenge the security system and confront the police forces in our region.

There was always someone watching you. He might be a friend who was also working for the security agencies. The goal was always to keep an iron fist in reserve, ready to ensure that the government had the upper hand over the people. As a witness from my country I can say that the way that things happened was totally unexpected, the people were most often hopeless about the possibility for change. The ability for the people to get together and demonstrate against the president was something that was allowed for a very short term, but was always kept under control. I can assure you that people were quietly looking for something more to happen, but they had fear inside themselves of being tortured. There were some small groups that were allowed under certain conditions to say something to inspire the people in order to defuse the tension. But it was only for show, so that the existence of democracy could be pointed to. The inflammable material needed to set off an uprising was in place, but the spark to ignite the fire was missing.

“On January 25, 2011, on what is normally a national holiday to celebrate Egypt’s police forces, Egyptians walked down streets protesting, disgusted with 30 years of corruption under the regime of Hosni Mubarak, thousands of protesters turned what was supposed to be a celebration into a day of rage as they marched toward the headquarters of the ruling National Democratic party shouting Down with Mubarak. The protest finally settled in and hunkered down onto Cairo’s main square, Tahrir Square. Within hours of the first protest, the police whom the Egyptian masses were ostensibly supposed to be celebrating turned on them with tear gas and water cannons trying to

disperse the crowds. The crowd remained unmoved, and within two weeks it was the regime that fell instead."[1] January 25 is the day of the peaceful revolution launched by several parts of the Egyptian opposition and abetted through the social networking site Face book. The most famous group was "We are all Khaled Said" joined by the young Muslim Brotherhood and protesting against the economic injustice, living conditions, and political repression as well as against what was considered the widespread corruption that existed under the rule of Mubarak. Two years before Esra Abdel Fattah, a young Egyptian girl, had called for a peaceful strike in protest against the deterioration of living conditions and soon received a response from others. As a result the strike succeeded, and that year opposition groups became more active in the provinces protesting against the poor conditions in the country Most notable was the April 6 Youth Movement. After the killing of the Egyptian youth Khaled Said, a number of activists created a page "We are all Khalid Said" on Face book, and called upon the Egyptians to get rid of the system that allowed such ill treatment by the police of the people.

In 2010, because a parliamentary election was going on, it was clear that people were being killed and tortured in prisons and police stations. This made the people angry at both the police and the regime. This time however events moved onto the streets. This was a sign of a genuine uprising against the police forces and the falsification of election results. In fact this time the situation was different. The parliamentary election was intended to position Mubarak's son Gamal to move into the presidential chair, with the presidential election being planned for 2011. The election of 2010 was as a result extremely upsetting too much of the Egyptian population. It was like a flashing red light warning about what was going to happen next.

The case of Tunisia should also be considered. In Tunisia President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali had been in office for over 20 years. Children were born, grew up, and in some cases were married without ever seeing anything but the same president. What happened next, when Mohamed Bouazizi committed self-immolation in protest against abject poverty and fear of the future, was also a flashing red light for the country as a whole. When we look on the Syrian case there is no great difference—poverty, the absence of freedom, human rights violations, and dictators are widespread all throughout the region. Therefore I see the main reasons considered as the triggers for the Arab spring as follows: oppression and tyranny, poor living conditions, and injustice. “What made January 25 extraordinary was not that Egyptians protested against the Mubarak Regime, it had been happening for a decade. What made it extraordinary was that for the first time, hundreds of thousands of ordinary, non-activist Egyptians joined them on the streets to demand the overthrow of the regime."[2]

Police brutality is one of the main causes of revolution, as is the imposition of emergency law. Egyptian citizens suffered a lot of injustice and the violation of their human rights, including through arrest, imprisonment, and murder. Corruption can be found all around the globe, but there is almost always someone fighting against it. In Egyptian society the practice of corruption was allowed for the elite people and their friends. The police were always watching, and sometimes even protecting such practices. As the December 31 New Year celebration was going on, people went out to have fun, visit each other and offer best wishes for a better New Year. But meanwhile the Minister of the Interior was busy doing something else. He has his own group of fellows to engage in dirty work. They seek to scare people by initiating a terrorist action

somewhere to create a public excuse to arrest, kill, and torture, in the process convincing Mubarak that they are doing the best they can for the country.

On the day when they planned to bomb one of Christian churches, the excuse was offered by the Minister of the Interior that Egypt would go on to sectarian war with Muslims and Christians engaged in a fight capable of turning the country back to civil war. In order to prove that they were correct the bombing of the Church of Saints, in what was called a terrorist attack, was organized in the city of Alexandria, the center of Christmas celebrations for the Eastern Churches. At twenty minutes after New Year the explosion occurred in the Church of the Saints, Side Bishr. This was indeed a terrorist attack in which twenty-four people (with Muslims among them) were killed and ninety-seven people wounded. It was discovered that the Interior Ministry was behind the action, acting through a secret group in the Ministry founded by twenty two officers and under the supervision of the Minister of the Interior.

In 1969, the first four points of contact of the Internet were established. At that time no one knew that the Internet would not only change communications in peaceful ways, but also could become an instrument used to eliminate dictators. And the Internet was not the only useful instrument. Cell phones were a particularly important tool, and in fact every possible means of communication was used in order to mobilize opposition. Through the social networking site Face book, the youth launched the most famous of the groups, “We are all Khaled Said.” In the 2011 Arab Spring protests, social media networks played an important role in the rapid disintegration of at least two regimes, Tunisia and Egypt, while also contributing to social and political mobilization in Bahrain and Syria. Information and Communications Technology and new social media had little

to do with the underlying social, political, and economic factors that motivated the protest movement. In Egypt, the gap between the small ruling elite and the large mass of the population had long ago reached dangerous levels. Most of the experts who studied the region carefully had come to believe that a major upheaval was inevitable at some point. However, the fact that the crisis occurred sooner rather than later, and as a direct follow-up to the protest movement in Tunisia, was in considerable measure due to the capacity to encourage popular mobilization of information and communications technology and social media networks. “The protests were launched by a Face book campaign run by the opposition “April 6 Youth Movement,” which generated tens of thousands of positive responses to the call to rally against government policies. Over the past decade, fast scalable real-time Internet-based information and communication tools have become relatively accessible in Egypt.”[3] The call came in protest against political and economic conditions as well as what is considered the considerable corruption that was rampant under the rule of President Hosni Mubarak. In response the Egyptians raised the call to get rid of the system.[4]

The revolution resulted in the resignation of Mubarak from power on February 11, 2011. In a short statement the Vice President acknowledged that the president had abandoned his post and went on to assign power temporarily to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). Mubarak and his subordinates had been expecting mass popular protests against the regime and in a meeting chaired by Mubarak himself one week before the revolution precautions and procedures for preemption were put in place to control an uprising. The assumptions that informed decisions significantly underestimated the number of protesters that would have to be controlled. The Prime

Minister and the cabinet were trying to save their seats. They could have thought about how to appease popular anger, or how to divide and preempt the protest groups. Mubarak could have come out to make a conciliatory address to the nation. Instead their hope was to eliminate protest altogether. They acted with arrogance, thinking only about aggression and not kindness, directing blows against the opposition rather than mercy, and selfish interests rather than community interests. The result was that they prepared the way for their own end.

The 25th of January 2011, “Tuesday,” was the start. The people went down into the streets. It was just the first day and the number of protesters was not huge. The majority was still cautious. However, the act of defiance was enough to encourage others. The Army was watching closely and operation centers were already alerted. The mission was to protect our country from all contingencies. The Army fully expected more to come. As the 25th of January ended debates began about what might come next. Friday was coming ahead, the weekend and the day for most to go to prayer. That was the day for the protest to be or not to be. Quickly and unexpectedly, it seemed that nearly all of the country assembled at the same time—and so it was. The police forces were ready, having received orders to rebuke the people. The police authorities estimated that they could do it, but the Army leadership expected that they could not. There were millions of people dispersed everywhere, and their goal was clear—the total elimination of the regime.

According to the national constitution the Egyptian Army does not belong to the president. The Army’s role, by law, is to protect the integrity and legitimacy of the constitutional order. This helps to explain why, unlike what was the case in several other

countries, the Egyptian Army reacted to the protests in the way that it did. Beginning with the spark provided by the protests of the 25th of January, the message as the Army understood it was clear: the Army would not use violence against the people. This was issued to us as a clear order, and it also came from within the conscience of every member of the Armed Forces—not a single shot would be fired against the protesters. Through the entire eighteen days of protests up until Mubarak's resignation on February 11th all operation centers were kept updated with complete details of the unfolding situation.

From my perspective as a witness of the revolution I can explain the Army's position and reactions in a variety of ways.

The historical role of the Egyptian Army, regarded as the backbone of the modern Egyptian state.

The positive attitude of the Army toward the revolution including a pledge to respect the demands of the Egyptian people.

The rapidity with which military leaders reacted to fast breaking events, which removed a lot of confusion about some issues, notably the status of the international treaties and obligations of Egypt, which contributed to the creation of a high degree of confidence and trust in international circles.

The supportive position of the Army with regard to the democratic process, and its commitment to a smooth transition of power to civilian authority. This conflicts strongly with some analysis which has evoked the possibility of a military coup in Egypt.

The composition of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which includes experts at the highest level in all areas. The Council took it upon itself to manage the

process of change and transformation, and to determine the management framework that would eventually hand over authority to a civilian leadership.

From the first day of popular mobilizations the Army's mission was clear: to contain the protestors, deter violence, and protect buildings that housed national security agencies as well as other major centers and anything else that might be targeted by criminals. On January 25th the orders were issued by the command centers to deploy armed forces through the whole country according to established time tables. Units responded appropriately, reporting the status of affairs, and assuring a reliable flow of information. As command centers we were taking the essential steps required to assure security. The most important concern of the armed forces was to protect our country.

Looking back on events from the position I held at the time, I cannot say that the situation was totally peaceful. In fact there were numerous incidents where some actors sought to take advantage of the situation in pursuit of special interests. The greatest surprise was how the population responded. In every community, including cities, small towns characterized by traditional life styles, and the countryside, everyone did their best to report and deter criminal behavior. This included the formation of local guards with responsible headquarters taking shifts to insure security around housing complexes and other exposed areas.

In the words of one analyst: "For most Egyptian activists today, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces has become the face of the counter-revolution. But even as the SCAF infuriates activists, who have long since abandoned the slogan of 'the people and the army are one hand,' it remains by far the most popular and trusted

institution in the country."[5] In fact the Army is playing a very important role in keeping the transition safe and secure for the people. Of course the forces of counter-revolution are always present. Mubarak and his following are trying hard to develop the story that the Army is opposed to change so that they can get back to power. In order for the counter-revolution to make progress it must make use of the media and means of communication. It is clear to me as, as it should be to you, that if you keep talking through the media, delivering the same message over and over again for day after day, it will have some effect. I ask myself why teenagers continue to go down into the streets in order to perpetrate violence and attack national security buildings. I did not expect that to happen and just ask the Army to keep watching. The Army has been securing the election process for the last several months, making sure that the democracy which the people want to bring into being is on track to succeed. The role of the Army is to protect democratic legitimacy. In the wake of the protests that forced Mubarak's resignation, the national police forces have not been able to return to full effectiveness. Only the Army has the power and authority to accomplish the mission that must be accomplished. That mission is to guarantee civil peace and to secure safe elections and a stable democratic transition. In this regard elections will be of critical importance: "The upcoming parliamentary election will significantly determine the future path of Egypt as it is tasked with drafting a new constitution. Thus it is a defining moment in Egyptian history. The composition of the new parliament is critical and the political battle between the secular and religious parties will likely be decided by their ability to attract the large group of undecided voters."[6]

Following the revolution the dreams of the Egyptians expanded to include many things. These included re-building a modern state according to principles and guidelines designed to promote development, breaking with the legacies of authoritarianism and repression that marked state practice for decades, and transforming the country into one of the most respected and highly regarded in the world, a model for the many countries that still do not respect the rights of their citizens. Respect for human life and dignity, and the vital interests of Egypt, were the last things that mattered to the former regime, which was a major reason why the revolution was ignited. However, and despite the unmistakable wave of enthusiasm and optimism that the change of regime has created, in the back of everyone's mind there is still a shadow of doubt about the victorious revolution's future. Eliminating the head does not necessarily break the body of the regime and its institutions. Shattering the old system does not inevitably lead to the birth of a new system. The current indicators that accompany the Arab Spring so far seem to confirm its democratic legitimacy. But the process of change confronts many obstacles, and it is not clear that its momentum will be sufficient in the foreseeable future to achieve the stability desired.

Behind the basic demand for democracy there are serious conflicts on the horizon. These conflicts are linked to questions about the institutions and practice of democracy, and the capacity to respond to promises and heightened expectations. Such conflict is dangerous and could end up voiding the practice of democracy of real content. There are many political parties that see in democracy nothing more than a means to achieve their own objectives. They do not believe in the substance of democracy which must allow for movements that seek to define the community project

differently. It is clearly a mistake to reduce democracy to a mere electoral mechanism that can allow access to power by groups with the intention to implement a hidden agenda that will reproduce the mechanisms of domination and exclusion at the level where power is exercised.

Especially in this period of high expectations and increased stress, there is great danger in movements that do not express honest political convictions and refuse to recognize other movements' right to be full partners in shaping the future of the nation. Such movements forget that the primary purpose behind the existence of a democratic system is competition to serve the interests of the development of the state and promote the happiness and welfare of its citizens, not to achieve the victory of a particular trend, social class, or political party. Democracy is not just a bridge that can be closed down once access to power has been achieved. Partnership in the management of state and society is one of the major virtues of the democratic project.

The election process that has been conducted so far has provided the opportunity for the Egyptian people to exercise the right to democratic choice through voting for the first time. Because it is Egypt's first step towards democracy, we as Egyptians were expecting many complications, including some criminal behavior. People have a strong desire to walk down the street peacefully to cast their vote. However, two weeks prior to the first round of elections there was an attempt by what I believe was a combination of selfish groups and movements to disrupt the proceedings. Many followers of the former regime did not want to see the elections run safely. At the same time, many political parties adopted strategies designed to forward their interests. The Muslim Brotherhood had its own ideas about the best tactics for winning a majority.

Other parties knew that they did not have a realistic chance to prevail. I believe that there were also external influences promoted by countries surrounding Egypt which knew that if the Egyptian revolution turned out to be successful it could provide a spark and impetus for their own people to rise up and demand change. Some of those I have mentioned had a hand in organizing and promoting violent protests in Tahrir Square in Cairo just before the first round of the election. Their goal was to create an atmosphere of danger that would discourage people from going out to vote, and create an environment that would allow them to shape the outcome of the election in the way that they preferred.

The Egyptian people inspired the world by rushing toward the election voting boxes to choose a People's Assembly. The newspapers of the world reacted with a wide range of evaluations. One U.S. newspaper headlined that "Egypt Elections Paint Complicated Picture for Obama Administration."[7] According to one account, "Egyptians are going to the polls in the second round of elections to a new parliament - the first since Mubarak was toppled in February. Voting has been relatively peaceful, with no major irregularities reported."[8] This indicates that the Army is carrying out its responsibilities in exactly the way and on the level that the people have expected. Its policy is to remain completely non-partisan and independent of the political contest between rival parties.[9] It is fair to assume that in the summer of 2012 a president will be democratically elected. At that point the Army can say mission accomplished, and the Egyptian people will greet the outcome with gratitude.

Endnotes

[1] Michael Jones "Arab Spring", linked from *The United States Army Home Page* NOV 23, 2011http://www.culturewars.com , Arab Spring.htm.

[2] Arab uprisings "The State of the Egyptian Revolution" NOV 10, 2011.

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